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ABSTRACT

An approach to teaching particularly well-suited to communication courses seeks to involve students in the learning process more directly by incorporating team-teaching in communication courses--not by professors but by students. Groups of students in each class form into teams with the purpose of setting goals and planning projects for furthering their own education. Contrary to initial appearances, such an approach does not let instructors off the hook--such courses may require more preparation than would a typical, day-to-day lecture course. Instructors must still structure the educational experience, selecting texts, material to be covered, and activities students may perform. The challenge for instructors is to allow student interaction to build on and supplement the initial structure set up by the instructor. M. S. Poole, D. R. Seibold, and R. D. McPhee's (1985) application of structuration theory points to the essential element of communicative action in group learning. Such group interaction allows the formation of a social reality, which in a teaching-through-teams course would allow more internalization of the subjects discussed, taught and experienced in student teams. If it is understood that people co-construct reality, it follows that students should have opportunities to help create social reality enacted by their educational process. Study of group structuration suggests that group interactions generate three key structural properties: group communication patterns, group decision rules, and power structures. (Contains 20 references.) (TB)

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TEACHING THROUGH TEAMS IN COMMUNICATION COURSES: LETTING STRUCTURATION HAPPEN

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TEACHING THROUGH TEAMS IN COMMUNICATION COURSES: LETTING STRUCTURATION HAPPEN

Students seeking an education are often ill-served in the university campus environment of today. Professors, heavily involved in research, delegate teaching duties as well as interactions with students to graduate teaching assistants. Many courses are taught as large lecture courses where taking notes and reading the text for the class are considered activities sufficient for "learning" the material. While statements like these represent extremes, most people in academia can, uncomfortably, describe situations where such rote activities substitute for actual learning. Of course, students are not blameless in the matter of poor college educational experiences. Some seek to read as little as possible, and to miss class whenever they feel like it, especially if they have found a way to discover that "crucial" material is not being covered that day. Weekend parties become higher priorities than discovering new concepts, understanding unfamiliar topics, or debating ideological principles. While these descriptions, too, represent extremes, most college students could

point to incidents which are specific illustrations of them.

This essay seeks to suggest and justify an approach to teaching, especially well-suited to communication courses, which has the potential to reduce the weariness and jadedness that has come to affect both sides of the learning transaction as indicated in the above scenarios. This approach seeks to involve students in the learning process more directly by incorporating team teaching in communication courses--and not by professors, but by students. Groups of students in each class form into teams with the purpose of setting goals and planning projects for furthering their own education. Students would not attend classes merely to absorb information from the professor; but through discussions, activities, and following through with team goals, would learn new concepts through exposure to, application of, and teaching of them.

A proposal for students learning together in groups is not as alien a scenario as could be believed in this era of large college lecture halls and extensively developed course curricula. In the era of Socrates and Plato, a small group of scholars assembled under a tree was considered a normal venue for learning. Relatively more recently, in small school buildings around the nation, older or more advanced students were expected to help younger students with their studies while the teacher worked with other students, thus allowing

pupils of all grade levels to be educated in one-room schoolhouses. Most people have heard--and many have come to understand--the saying that the best way to learn something is to try to teach it to someone else. In addition, team learning fits with new challenges faced by private companies as they seek to enhance their productivity through creative and effective work teams (Aubrey & Felkins, 1988; Francis & Young, 1979; Parker, 1991).

Contrary to initial appearances, such an approach to teaching does not let instructors off the hook--such courses may require more preparation than would a typical, day-to-day lecture course. Instructors still must structure the educational experience, selecting texts, material to be covered, and activities students may perform. They must help students as they structure and work with their teams. If anything, such an approach will require more planning and interaction with students than current "traditional" lecture/discussion teaching methods. A team learning approach is also suggested by recent communication theory and research. Theoretical backing is provided in part by explorations into the social construction of reality (Mead, 1934) and the recursive formation of social structure suggested by structuration theory (Giddens, 1979; 1984).

Structuration Theory and Team Learning

Mead (1934) has described the way people internalize the expectations of others, in the form of a "generalized other," as they form an identity and learn to interact in social settings. Whether referred to abstractly as social reality or concretely as "peer pressure," such an internalization process is clearly a strong influence on individual, as well as social, development. A teaching-through-teams approach can use group interactions to not only develop interaction patterns in a classroom, but to facilitate learning as students participate in the social construction of reality, including the reality of the subjects being learned. Perkins (1994) has recently added to the calls for instructional practices which incite student ability to think critically about a course's subject matter, in great part through restructuring the typical classroom performance by altering the traditional "roles" played by instructor and students.

The challenge for instructors in a teaching-through-teams course is to set up an initial structure in a way which will lead student teams to cover and experience material so that they will in fact learn in the desired subject area. The key is to allow student interaction to build on and supplement the initial structure set up by the instructor. Structures have a dual nature: They are both

the medium and outcome of communicative action (Giddens, 1979; 1984). Structures provide the means for communicating, while such means only gain existence in the process of their enactment during interaction. Thus it is only through communicative action that communication structure forms. If instructors set up a basic team structure and set each team to communicating, the students will begin creating their own structures, or their own "reality," in relation to the course's subject, rather than simply being expected to absorb it from the instructor.

The utility and potential of a team approach is suggested in the work of Poole, Seibold, and McPhee (1985). Their application of structuration theory pointed to the essential element of communicative action in group learning. Such group interaction allows the formation of a social reality, which in a teaching-through-teams course would also allow more internalization of the subjects discussed, taught, and experienced in student teams. Each group's social reality, with the proper preparation and initial structure, would include aspects of newly acquired communication knowledge as well as experience. Students then would not be expected merely to absorb their knowledge from lectures and books, but would be forced to actively create their knowledge through interactions within their teams.

Communicative actions clearly take on a pivotal role in group work as they both constitute and reflect the group structures, which then create and recreate the group knowledge. Communicative acts, as the key elements of structuration, occur at the boundary between the actual interaction and the invoked structure during the process of social reproduction (Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1985). The structure, or norms, of interaction are both formed and invoked through interactions among group members. Four key elements of communicative action have been noted:

1) Communicative action is temporal; thus only one rule or element of structure may be enacted at any one time.
2) Actors must cope with historical precedent as they interact.
3) Actors' knowledge conditions and affects the actual action taken.
4) Many consequences of action are unintended and unknown

(Poole et al., 1985, p. 78.)

The instructor must set the teams in motion by giving them an initial structure, from which a team may interact and create new norms and new knowledge through such interaction. Groups will do this by forming a history through a sequence of communication acts, building on the knowledge they accumulate and moving in often unpredictable directions. An instructor may set up an initial

structure, but there is no way to directly control what teams will build on that structure as they learn by members communication acts.

If it is understood that people co-construct reality, it follows that students should have opportunities to help create the social reality enacted by their educational process. Study of group structuration suggests that group interactions generate three key structural properties of groups which are produced and reproduced in the interactions of group members: group communication patterns, group decision rules, and power structures (Poole et al., 1985). A student-team approach to teaching would allow student teams to form such properties, and then use them to assist the students in learning to understand and apply new knowledge through their team interactions. With the development of rules and power differences, contradictions always emerge in group interactions. Through the creation of a system of interaction, a group structure can be formed for allowing the confrontation of two major contradictions: the tension between individual identity and merging with the group, and the tension between the need for group action and the need to make a systematic, rational decision (Poole et al., 1985). Structures allow group members to navigate contradictions. In coming to grips with contradictions, students can be sparked to interact, teach one another, and learn about communication scholarship through

experience and teaching during interaction.

Practical Benefits of Teams

On the job and in social settings, Western society often addresses problems by assigning them to small groups for analysis, research, and solution generation (Jensen & Chilberg, 1991). Teams in classes work to empower all members and facilitate participative decision-making. Rather than having the instructor make all decisions regarding the students' education, students collaborate on those decisions. The continuing need for students to learn to apply communication skills and research results, as well as becoming familiar with them, is met through the use of student teams for teaching in communication courses. The processes of both familiarization and argumentation can be enhanced by groups of students interacting in search of some level of agreement on understandings of communication concepts (Hoffman & Kleinman, 1994; Salazar, Hirokawa, Propp, Julian, & Leatham, 1994). Teaching through teams has five major practical benefits, to be described in this section.

First, communication concepts and skills are not only discussed, but experienced and practiced in a small group setting. Team learning allows more interaction, and use of communication skills, than does a more passive classroom environment. Group

discussions force students to become active in a learning process as they decide how they will fit into their particular team and its learning processes (Cragan & Wright, 1991). Participation in teams allows students to not only become exposed to new material, but to discuss it in a group setting and often experience a concept or principle in the course of team communication. Rather then being mere spectators in a trance, students are enlisted to become part of the classroom drama (Perkins, 1994).

Second, student learning can be enhanced by promoting more ownership of the knowledge discovered and used by small groups in addition to that merely transmitted by a lecture or text. Groups can have some control over the pace and order in which they grow in knowledge, and students have shown more satisfaction with and retention of knowledge gained in this fashion. Research into a Personalized System of Instruction (PSI), which has similar attributes to team learning, showed students to be more satisfied with basic speech courses which used it (Gray, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Yerby, 1986). Students in such courses were also less likely to feel as much communication apprehension and had higher final exam grades after being allowed more self-paced learning with the assistance of fellow students (Gray et al., 1986). Proposals for using PSIs tend toward a team approach to learning, by advocating

the use of student proctors, self-paced learning in stages, and the use of classroom lectures to motivate rather than to supply essential information (Keller & Sherman, 1982). A more interactive, individualized approach, which student teams allow, clearly leads to more student retention, satisfaction, and ownership of material learned.

Third, as group members help other members learn, they learn themselves, as teaching something is one of the best ways to learn it. Not only can students gain insight into the instructor's role, they can appreciate some of the influences instructors respond to as they structure courses. By developing highly personalized relationships, along with reinforcing their knowledge by passing it on to others through more individualized instruction, student education is enhanced (Seiler & Fuss-Reineck, 1986).

Fourth, more leadership opportunities can be incorporated into classroom activities. During group interactions, different forms of leadership may emerge, depending upon the issue under discussion or the nature of the team's task (Cragan & Wright, 1991). With teams, far more students may exercise leadership than in a more typically structured class. Some may excel at organizing, or motivating, or conciliating, and will have the opportunity to learn firsthand about the benefits and drawbacks of such leadership skills. Classroom

teams also provide a source for discussion and experience of emerging and changing leadership roles, and the types of communication leaders must engage in. Here, too, students not only learn in the abstract about leadership, they experience it personally and directly in their teams as well.

Finally, as students are challenged to use concepts taught in the course to analyze their own team's interaction, they not only learn by doing, but learn by analyzing what they have done. While traditional courses may stop at the first stage--familiarizing students with communication concepts, teams allow students to proceed to a second and third stage of learning as they experience many such concepts, and then to analyze those events and their results. This allows for a more wholistic learning experience than is possible in a solely lecture or text-based course.

Putting Teams Into Practice

All of these benefits may only be gained after much work and planning of the course so that effective teams can come to fruition. Several key steps need to be taken to provide for team learning. Most importantly, discussion of basic group characteristics must take place in any course using teams. Hirokawa (1985) has suggested that groups need to develop several requisite conditions to achieve higher decision quality: the group needs to understand their basic

goal, the group must develop realistic alternatives to reaching the goal, and the group must assess the positive and negative consequences associated with each possible alternative.

A single set of clear, measureable goals must be given to each team. The nature of modern education demands that a course on health communication, for instance, must deal with key aspects of that subject; teams cannot simply study whatever they please. Thus, teams must have an unambiguous target to work toward, even if the means of achieving it--and even the means of evaluation--are left ambiguous. In that ambiguity, groups have the opportunity to build their own structure of communication practices and knowledge. But the initial structure is the responsibility of the instructor. Groups may be expected to cover certain texts, familiarize themselves with a certain subject area through research, and/or choose or create selected exercises to perform to practice or illustrate their knowledge.

Students also must be given clear guidelines for how the groups should function. Student-team teaching is a radical change in the typical plot most students have in mind for a college education experience. While this is a strength of such teaching, the ambiguous and flexible learning process students encounter in teams may confuse them mightily at first (Perkins, 1994). Clear

guidelines for team progress can point them down at least a broad way. Recurring phases have been observed in group interactions, moving from an orientiation phase where members are familiarizing themselves with one another through conflict and emergence phases where polarization is followed by a tolerance for ambiguity, and a reinforcement phase where cohesion and unity become dominant (Fisher, 1970). Clear group guidelines serve to assist learning teams navigate each of these phases, by reminding them of their basic purpose and giving them a set of unambiguous, non-negotiable rules to work from. As interaction proceeds, group development has been shown to develop in extremely complex ways (Poole & Roth, 1989). Unambiguous guidelines will salvage a group otherwise drifting as members try to create a set of procedures from scratch. Grappling with course materials, after all, must remain the key function of student learning teams.

Team norms and roles need to be discussed during the course. Some important few norms and roles may be set up by the instructor as part of the team guidelines described above, while others may be created and flourish through the teams' interactions. Agreement on norms and roles leads to the social development of rules for interaction and decision-making, which leads to the social support critical for making teams fun and creative venues for learning

(Pavitt & Curtis, 1990). In developing group norms and roles, team members will be creating the structure for their own learning experiences. Instructors must be ready to help teams understand the importance of group norms, which may include performance standards and methods of evaluation and grading; along with the roles individuals assume (leader, organizer, notetaker, even comic relief). These group characteristics will be of key importance to how teams and their members interact and create their knowledge of the subject at hand.

Finally, leadership must be discussed and the teams themselves or the instructor must make clear how leaders are selected and what their responsibilities are. Initially, allowing teams time for familiarizing themselves with their members will help to reduce initial tensions among them (Booth-Butterfield, Booth-Butterfield & Koester, 1988). Depending on the context and instructor preference, leaders may then be assigned on a rotating basis by the instructor, chosen by the group, or emerge through a combination of factors (i. e., communication skills, willingness, or high marks). While the study of leadership may not be important to the subject of the course, the issue should not be bypassed due to its universal presence, in some form, on any team.

Conclusion

All of these issues will require some alteration of or additions to the curriculum of any communication course using teams for learning. Yet such changes are merited if they enliven the learning experience for both students and instructors by making both parties more proactive toward one another and toward the material being studied. With effective planning and application, teaching through student teams can enhance communication education by allowing students to practice and analyze their own communication skills to a much greater degree than in a more traditional, lecture- or text-bound course. By having more opportunities for structuration, team members build knowledge through interaction, increase their ownership and faimiliarity with the created knowledge, and will likely be more excited about or satisfied with their eductional experiences. Through experiencing the dynamism of student teams as they individually wrestle with course materials, educators too may find themselves intrigued and reinvigorated in their chosen fields of instruction.

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